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ABSTRACT

Because the characteristics of children change at different ages, child caregiver knowledge, techniques, and stresses also should vary. The author suggests ways to improve or eliminate three specific stresses of infant/toddler caregiving: low pay and status, physical stress, and emotional stress. Infant caregivers should inform parents about the value of caregiving and the need for quality child care. Caregivers should demand professional and in-service training from centers and community colleges as a way of gathering support for improved pay and working conditions. To reduce physical stress and exposure to illness, caregivers should take care of themselves and should encourage their centers to provide health coverage, substitute caregivers, and comfortable places for meals and breaks. To avoid the emotional stress caused by the intense attachments and bonds that develop between caregiver and child, caregivers should communicate their feelings and work together for sensitivity of staff needs. (BJD)

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CCEP Handout #17: SPECIAL STRESSES OF INFANT CAREGIVING

Because the characteristics of children vary greatly from age to age, the knowledge and techniques that their caregivers need to have likewise varies a great deal. Similarly, the pleasures and the stresses of caring for different age groups also varies. Mot surprisingly, most caregivers have preferences in terms of the age of children they prefer to work with.

Caregivers who work with infants and toddlers will often find difficult problems or stresses, many of which seem overwhelming. that are very specific to these programs. But - they also discover the special joys of working with children this age: the close relationships that develop, the instant feedback received from the children, the constantly changing development of the infants, the creativity, and much more.

As in all of child care, the challenge of infant caregiving has its rewards and its drawbacks. This handout will examine some of the special stresses of infant/toddler caregiving - and some suggestions for improving or eliminating them.

PAY AND STATUS

Infant caregivers fall prey to the low pay and status afforded most child care workers, but are also victim to society's ambivalence regarding babies in child care. It is difficult for many people to accept the notion that extremely young children can be cared for outside of the home, regardless of the economic or social realities of parents with infants or toddlers. While it is hard enough to encourage increased support for child care in general, the prejudices regarding establishing and maintaining infant care create more roadblocks for staff.

One of the toughest of these roadblocks is the fact that infant care is very expensive, mainly because of the high staff:child ratio in these programs. When impending budget cuts are combined with doubts as to the value of infant care, the programs and the jobs of infant/toddler caregivers become extremely vulnerable.

Infant/toddler caregivers who wish to upgrade their status, salaries and working conditions must not only defend the value of their programs, they also face a hard battle to establish themselves as professionals. In many minds, infant caregiving is a short step (if any) away from "parenting" or "babysitting", and does not constitute "real work". (And therefore, does not warrant "real" wages.)

At the same time, infant caregivers are expected to command professional skills and training specific to caring for infants and toddlers. While this may be closer to the definition of a "professional", infant/toddler teachers often find that they

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have the fewest resources available to them - there is a lack of published research, college level courses, training programs, and books specific to the field of infant/toddler care.

What you can do...

- **Talk to parents and others about what you do.** Educating people as to the need for quality child care and the value of your job will help you gather support for improved pay and working conditions.

- **Join groups who are already working to improve the situation.** Find out about lobbying and policy-making efforts in your community, and assist them in their efforts. (You won't feel so alone!)

- **Demand specific training** to be offered at your local community college. An organized group of interested infant/toddler caregivers can make a convincing argument to a college administrator!

- **Institute consistent in-service training for child care staff and parent education classes in your center.** Join with other centers in your area and share resources and expertise.

PHYSICAL STRESSES

Infant/toddler caregivers face continuous exposure to common infant illnesses, such as colds, flu and diarrhea. They may often find themselves tired and ill, particularly when they first enter the field and their resistance has not been built up. Diapering and feeding invite unique health hazards particular to infant/toddler programs.

Because of the close interpersonal relationships that develop between caregivers and infants, many workers feel guilty when they take time off from work for sickness or other reasons. This may be compounded by a lack of trained substitutes who are familiar to the children. Workers who do not have any sick leave provisions or health benefits may feel compelled to work when they are ill because they can't afford not to.

What you can do...

- **Take care of yourself.** If you are unhealthy and over stressed, both you and the children suffer.

- **Learn good diapering and food preparation procedures** to reduce the incidence of related diseases and illnesses.

- **Stay home when you are sick.** Coming to work will probably only make you sicker, and won't help the children and other staff, either.

- **Encourage your center to develop a reliable pool of available substitutes** who have contact with the children on a frequent basis. These subs should be trained before working in the program. Have plenty of useful information about each child and the program on hand so that subs can do a safe and useful job. (See CCEP Handout #1, Improving Substitute Policies.)

- **Encourage your center to institute health coverage and a supportive health policy.** There are many options available for centers to provide full or partial health coverage for staff. (See CCEP Handout #3, Health Coverage.) A supportive health policy encourages staff to take care of themselves by staying home when sick, providing reliable substitutes, and lessening health and safety hazards on the job.

Constant lifting and carrying of babies, using baby-size furniture, doing routine maintenance, etc. takes its toll on staff, also. Injured backs and sore muscles are common, and constant aggravation of these injuries can mean permanent damage.

What you can do...

- **Learn the proper way to lift and carry.** Invite a physical therapist to an in-service session to train the staff in these techniques.

- **Have adult-size furniture available for staff.** Make sure that changing tables are the correct height, and that storage is at convenient levels.

Aside from creating physical stress, the enormous responsibility of taking care of infants, (which includes translating and responding to their constant needs, as well as attending to parents and administrators) produces mental stress as well. The emotional demands of infant/toddler caregiving are often aggravated in programs in which staff do not receive breaks.

What you can do...

- **Institute a break schedule.** Work with you administration and other staff to design and implement a workable break policy. (See CCEP Handout # —,Improving Break Policy).

- **Have a comfortable place to relax.** Too often when you get a break, there's no place to take it. Make sure that there is a quiet, comfortable (with adult

furniture) room or place for staff to go to during their meals and breaks.

- **Take a walk!** When the noise is unbearable, and you and the children have "cabin fever," try taking them away from the center for a change of scenery and a breath of fresh air.

EMOTIONAL STRESSES

Infant/toddler caregivers are intimately involved with the everyday lives of the children they care for. They are keyed into the most specific details and transition periods in each child's development, and are responsible for how many children will spend and experience much of their time during their first two years of life. Intense attachments and bonds are formed between caregiver and child which in many aspects resemble those between child and parent. These pleasurable aspects are, of course, at the root of the rewards of infant/toddler caregiving. However, as staff and not parents, they must also become aware of the problems that may arise from these relationships, and deal with these problems as professionals, particularly in regard to responsibility and separation.

What you can do...

- **Recognize your own feelings.** If caring for infants brings up some (often heavy) personal feelings about separation, having children, discipline, etc., make sure that these issues can be resolved and don't interfere with your ability to care for the children in a professional manner.

The relationships and trust that develops among staff is equally important for effective caregiving, particularly in an infant/toddler center. With so many competing needs and priorities, working without the cooperation of other staff members can be an overwhelming and disastrous situation. The quick pace and demanding responsibilities often cannot be handled by one person alone, and if attempted, can create an unsafe environment.

What you can do...

- **Work together.** Be sensitive to the needs of other staff members and work on communicating effectively. If there is a problem, bring it up and try and solve it together. Staff meetings can be a time to share feelings as well as information, although personal conflicts among staff may best be solved in private. Sharing information about the children will help the staff offer the best care to each individual child, and group discussion will often help you find answers to the problems you've been grappling with for weeks.

Developing relationships with the children is only half the story - the other half is

communicating well with parents. For many children and parents, this is their first child care experience and the separation can be a source of great anxiety for everyone. Often, this is more difficult for parents than for the infants - there may be great doubt and guilt about leaving their baby in child care, and these feelings may be expressed subtly or not so subtly to the child and to the teacher. In addition to feeling guilty about "leaving" their baby, parents may resent the close attachments that form between the teacher and their child, and begin to feel left out of their child's life. Even as her professionalism and competency are being called into question, the infant/toddler caregiver must recognize and respond to these concerns of parents.

Some infant/toddler caregivers face an opposite reaction from parents: they are expected to be child development experts, able to answer all questions about the child's development, and give advice about childrearing! The weight of these expectations can be oppressive for even the most knowledgeable and experienced caregiver!

Infant/toddler caregivers must also contend with the expectations of parents, some of which are unreasonable. Parents may not trust the teacher to offer the type of care and environment they think is best for their child, others may expect the teacher to encourage behavior (such as toilet training) before the child is ready for it. Finally, cultural and philosophical differences may produce tension between the caregiver and the parent, creating a stressful environment for the teacher and the child.

What you can do...

- **Be sensitive to parents' feelings and needs.** Help reassure parents that their feelings of guilt and anxiety are common and can be dealt with. You can help them work out these issues by being available to talk with them about their concerns and giving concrete evidence that many of their fears are unfounded. Understanding parents' feelings can help you take their attitudes less personally, and alleviates stressful anger.

- **Communicate with parents.** Show them that you are partners in their child's care by sharing anecdotes and observations about their child frequently. A parent who is kept apprised of his/her child's development will feel less "left out" of their lives, and more responsive and involved with the child's day care.

- **Be able to give resources to parents.** Aside from your personal knowledge of child development, you may feel more comfortable referring parents to resources - books, articles, agencies, etc. - when you are called upon for technical or subjective advice. Helping parents make educated choices or

decisions, rather than telling them what to do, is a more comfortable situation for many caregivers.

- **Be clear about the philosophy of the center.** Conflicts often arise when parents' expectations differ from the philosophy of the program. Establishing and explaining center procedures regarding such issues as toilet training and discipline, and the theory behind these procedures when children enter the program, will go a long way towards reducing conflict between parents and staff.

- **Express yourself.** Parents, co-workers, and directors need to know about your feelings also. When appropriate, share your thoughts and concerns with parents so that your communication is a two-way street. Sometimes, attending to the children, the parents and all your other responsibilities can make you feel like the job is all give and no take — protect yourself from burnout by addressing your own needs as well.

As unique as the stresses of infant/toddler care are, so are the rewards: for every aggravation, there is a moment when caregiver and child connect and influence each other's lives... for every irate parent and crying infant, there is a time to sit and rock that child peacefully to sleep...for every problem, there is the pleasure of being so close, and so much a part of a child's early development.

If you have suggestions or information about the special stresses of infant/toddler care, or would like more information about child care working conditions, please contact the Child Care Employee Project, P.O. Box 5603, Berkeley, CA 94705, (415) 653-9889.

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